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RACE: ALWAYS COMPLICATED, NEVER SIMPLE

Tarik D. LaCour

Abstract: *The concept that race has evolved rather than remaining static is not well understood, both outside and within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In Religion of a Different Color, W. Paul Reeve shows how the concept of race evolved from painting Mormons as nonwhite in the 19th century to “too white” by the beginning of the 21st century.*

Review of W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). 352 pp. \$36.95 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

In December 2013 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints published an online essay titled “Race and the Priesthood.”¹ Who wrote the essay is unknown, but a note at the bottom states that the essay was written with the contributions of multiple scholars. It is not hard to understand why the essay was written; in the 40 years since the revelation on priesthood was received, the issue has not been addressed directly in a general conference talk. Many people have questions about who originally initiated the ban on blacks holding the priesthood: whether it was inspired and whether some of the myths that had permeated LDS culture were accurate. The essay dismissed many of the myths, but it left open the question of whether or not the ban was inspired. So while parts of the puzzle have been resolved, many questions remain.

Enter W. Paul Reeve, author of *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*. Reeve is a historian and professor at the University of Utah, where he specializes in Utah history,

1. “Race and the Priesthood,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, December 2013, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood>.

Mormon history and the history of the American West; in other words, he is qualified to write about the issues of race as it relates to the LDS Church. Recently, Reeve was also appointed the first Mormon Studies professor at the University of Utah,² so we can expect more books on the history of blacks and the LDS Church in the coming years as Reeve continues his research. Additional reviews of Reeve's book have come from eminent LDS and non-LDS historians, such as Patrick Q. Mason, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Alexandra Griffin.

The subtitle of the book almost seems like an oxymoron: *Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*. Isn't the problem with Mormons that they are *too* white? After all, at the recent press conference introducing Russell M. Nelson as the 17th president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a newspaper reporter raised the point that "the Church leadership is still white, male, American."³ In addition, in the recent Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, all the original missionaries are Americans. There has not yet been an African-American General Authority of the LDS Church. How in the world could the LDS Church "struggle for whiteness"? It seems to be an area in which whites already flourish and even dominate.

Reeve, preempting these responses, says the following in the introduction to his book:

This book argues that one of those transitions was racial: from not securely white in the nineteenth century to too white by the twenty-first century. Being white equaled access to political, social, and economic power: all aspects of citizenship in which outsiders sought to limit or prevent Mormon participation. ... The process was never linear and most often involved both

2. Bob Mims, "The University of Utah's first Mormon Studies professor is a historian researching early black converts," *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2017/09/20/u-prof-reeve-named-first-simmons-mormon-studies-professor/>.

3. See "First Presidency News Conference," YouTube video, 46:42, a press conference with the First Presidency held on January 16, 2018, posted by "Mormon Channel," 18:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8Cd3vcWYnc>. I will assume the reporter was referring to members of the two highest governing bodies of the Church (the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve) as non-Americans who have been part of the various quorums of the Seventy for at least a couple of decades. In addition, a non-American was recently sustained to the Quorum of the Twelve on March 31, 2018. See "Elder Ulisses Soares," *Newsroom*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, March 31, 2018, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/elder-ulisses-soares>.

sides talking past each other. Yet, Mormons in the nineteenth century recognized their suspect racial position. (3)

This remark is fascinating in and of itself. Most of us (including me) assumed that Mormons were disliked primarily because of their religion, and that is true to a point. However, if Reeve is correct — and it seems he is — the main reason for the marginalization was that Mormons were not seen as being white at all; they were thought of as having formed a new, inferior race.

The cover photo of Reeve's book comes from an April 1904 picture in *Life* magazine. A person named Elder Berry (who looks suspiciously like Joseph F. Smith, the Church's president when the magazine cover first appeared) is shown holding hands with eight of his children. The caption underneath the picture reads: "Mormon Elder-berry — Out with His Six-Year-Olds, Who Take After Their Mothers."⁴ Of the eight children, five are white, one is black, one is Asian, and the other is Indian. This picture was an attempt to show that Mormons embraced interracial marriage and hence were also thereby in a state of "racial decline."

Reeve, using this picture as a framework for his book, dedicates one chapter to the four white children, two chapters to the Indian child, four to the black child, and one chapter to the Asian child. He notes that just as in real life, not all children receive equal attention in his book (11).

The chapters on the white children (14-51) shows that while the children are from parts of the world notably white, early critics of the Church saw them as nonwhite because the children were mixed among the other races and because Utah — distant as it was from the eastern cities — was cut off from white-culture society. This was not seen as a joke; medical doctors submitted this thesis to peer-reviewed journals, and their papers were published (16-20). While there was pushback as to whether a race of people could be created in a short amount of time, the general consensus was that Mormons were something close to white but not fully white. As Reeve had noted earlier (6), only white people were fit to rule and lead in that time, so this was taken as evidence that the Mormons were not fit to be in the United States or to be leaders of American territories.

The two chapters on Indians (52-105) show that while the relations between Mormons and their Indian neighbors were largely cordial, the problem of racial regression remained because Mormons were encouraged to marry and did marry Indians. Given that this was the era just after the age of Andrew Jackson, the public had an unfavorable view of Indians, and by association the view of Mormons declined as they intermarried with

4. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 2.

them. Furthermore, since the Book of Mormon claims (according to the critics of that time) that the American continent belonged rightfully to the Indians, this led to understandable tension (55-74).

The chapters on blacks cover three main topics: the Church's attitude toward slavery, its attitude toward miscegenation, and the origins of the priesthood ban. Reeve notes that for the most part of his life (after a statement in 1836) Joseph Smith was consistently against slavery and was open to the idea of blacks living among whites, a radical view during that time (126-27). He also proposed that profits from the sale of public lands could be used to pay slave owners for their freed slaves (127). However, Smith was consistently against miscegenation, though the Church had no official policy about the matter during his lifetime (127). It is also well documented that Smith was aware of several black people being ordained to the priesthood and had no qualms about it (106, 126).

During the administration of Brigham Young, things began to change. At the outset, Young generally had the same outlook as Smith: he was against slavery and had no problems with blacks being ordained to the priesthood. In a remark he made to William McCary during an unofficial Church trial, he remarked that Walker Lewis, a black barber, was "one of the best elders" (131). In 1852 he formally announced the priesthood ban before the Utah legislature (rather than in a Church gathering), justifying it by saying that blacks were descendants of Cain and were cursed in regard to the priesthood (144-46), a theme that would recur until the ban was lifted in 1978.

Reeve concludes the book by saying that Mormons have gone from being described as not white at all to too white by the time Mitt Romney ran for president in 2012 (269-72). This does seem to be the case, but if Reeve is correct, it did not have to be that way. Mormons could have been seen as the most progressive Church when it came to matters of race. Instead, it chose to retrench and thereby became seen as one of the most regressive and is paying the consequences in the modern day and age. To be sure, many members of the Church are not white, and the Church is growing most rapidly in nonwhite areas (Africa and Asia, for example). But the afterglow of a checkered racial past remains visible. Only time will correct it.

One of the most important books in Mormon history in the last 50 years is undoubtedly Richard Bushman's biography of Joseph Smith. Why? It helps readers understand Mormonism and Joseph Smith as well as they can be understood and therefore better grasp the community of the Saints that flowed from the divine, special revelations to Joseph

as prophet, seer, and revelator. *Rough Stone Rolling*,⁵ coupled with the publication of the Joseph Smith Papers, assists the Saints in doing this. However, given that race is such a fascinating issue in and of itself and the fact that the issue of race in relationship to many things is not well understood by the Latter-day Saints, Professor Reeve's *Religion of a Different Color* adds significantly to understanding the cultural milieu in which the Church was founded as well as understanding one of the more controversial aspects of the Church's subsequent history. Reeve has written a truly commendable book that should be in the library of every member of the LDS Church.

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5. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

